

REC: Social, Behavioural and Education Research (REC: SBE) Communique: Research guidance in the time of level 1 of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Target group: All researchers/ investigators who are actively embarking on, engaged in research, or required to do so (including undergraduate and postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows), supervisors/ promotors and research support staff.

Purpose: To provide guidance on the continuation or commencement of in-person research in the context of lockdown level 1 and beyond.

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Authors: Executive Committee of the REC: Social, Behavioural and Education Research (REC: SBE).

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1. The SA Government declared a move to lockdown level 1 and has promulgated regulations with effect from 21 September 2020.¹
- 1.2. While infection rates in the Western Cape and other provinces appear to have flattened and or declined, it must be acknowledged that the pandemic remains unpredictable. Researchers thus need to be mindful of localized changes to infections rates and respond to such circumstances in a responsible and ethical manner. This implies a responsible approach to research in the context of COVID-19 which prioritises the health, well-being and safety of research participants, their communities and research staff and students over other considerations.
- 1.3. The REC therefore expects that researchers remain vigilant in the face of COVID-19, irrespective of the pandemic levels, inclusive of protecting participants and communities (especially those who fall within the vulnerable groups e.g. those older than 60 and/or with comorbidities) from risk and safeguarding themselves against the transmission of COVID-19.
- 1.4. The REC: SBE position statement dated 20 March 2020 is still relevant and should be considered together with this communique ([REC Position Statement.pdf](#)). This document serves to supplement the REC: SBE's original position statement.
- 1.5. The REC: SBE may revert to its original position statement if the SA Government reverts to lockdown levels 2, 3, 4 or 5.

2. GUIDELINES FOR RESEARCH GOING FORWARD

- 2.1. The REC acknowledges the challenges faced by supervisors and postgraduate students needing to meet educational outcomes (for degree purposes) as well as researchers needing to meet deadlines set by sponsors.
- 2.2. Researchers are still encouraged to consider alternative ways of collecting data that do not involve physical contact or being in undue physical proximity with participants or communities². These alternative activities may include desktop research, literature reviews, secondary data analysis, online or virtual data collection activities, individual or group interviews conducted via online meeting or web conferencing tools, such as Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, etc.
- 2.3. Research that requires physical contact or being in undue physical proximity to participants during the COVID-19 pandemic, is still strongly discouraged, **unless there are very exceptional, and well-justified reasons to continue.**

¹ For the latest updates on the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa and information about SA's national regulations, please visit <https://sacoronavirus.co.za/>

² Herewith referring to face-to-face individual or group interviews or any activity where in-person contact is unavoidable.

- 2.4. In these exceptional cases, the researcher must immediately notify the REC: SBE of their case and provide a strong ethical justification for the approval of their in-person research during the COVID-19 pandemic and reasons why virtual or online methodologies cannot be used.
- 2.5. The REC: SBE will consider such cases on an individual-basis by doing a thorough risk-benefit analysis and by evaluating the anticipated benefits of the research and measures that the researcher will put in place to prevent the spread of the virus. The researcher will be required to submit a COVID-19 risk mitigation strategy to ensure that risks of transmission are minimised and controlled as far as possible.
- 2.6. **All in-person research will be treated as medium to high risk, depending on study design, methodology and data collection methods. The REC: SBE will review these requests at a convened meeting of the REC: SBE.** Researchers who wish to notify the REC of their case must first consult the REC: SBE's guidance for in-person research during the COVID-19 pandemic for guidance on how to proceed with their submission (see Annexure A below).
- 2.7. The REC: SBE would like to remind researchers who are bound by funding or other contractual deadlines/requirements to **proactively engage** with their funders, sponsors, and other relevant project stakeholders on the impact that COVID-19 and social distancing strategies will have on meeting project milestones and reporting deadlines. The suspension of human research that involve physical contact or being in undue physical proximity to participants will have particular impact on existing contractual and service level agreements with research assistants, fieldworkers, and other project staff. Where possible, researchers should proactively engage with the funder/sponsor/relevant stakeholders regarding these timeframes and make the necessary arrangements.
- 2.8. SBE research that requires visits to the following research sites will only be allowed if the facility can ensure that they are compliant with the regulations and directions set by the government for visits to: Correctional Centres, Detention Facilities, Holding Cells, Military Detention Facilities, health establishments and facilities, and older persons' residential facilities. Written permission should be obtained from the facility where the research will be conducted. The permission letter should be signed by an authorised person confirming that the facility is compliant with regulations and directions set by the government.
- 2.9. The REC wishes to point out the responsibility for managing and mitigating the risks to the multiple stakeholders involved in conducting in-person research in the current circumstances:

2.9.1 Risks to research participants

- Becoming infected by a researcher or fellow research participant that might be asymptomatic/symptomatic during a research-related activity.
- Becoming infected by a researcher that might be asymptomatic/symptomatic during a visit by the researcher to his/her home, community centre or when meeting in a public place like a restaurant.
- Being infected due to handling objects contaminated by the virus during a research-related activity.
- Potential for being more severely affected by COVID-19 if over the age of 60 and/or having a comorbidity or an illness causing an immunocompromised health status.
- Carrying the virus from the research site into the home or community.
- Being fined or arrested for not adhering to appropriate lockdown alert level restrictions e.g. not wearing masks, etc.

2.9.2 Risks to researchers

- Researcher/postgraduate student becoming infected by handling objects contaminated by the virus. More severely affected by COVID-19 if over the age of 60 and/or having a comorbidity or an illness causing an immuno-compromised health status.
- Researcher/postgraduate student becoming infected by entering a high-risk COVID 19 area.
- Infecting co-researchers due to the aforementioned actions.
- Infecting own family members due to the aforementioned actions.
- Potentially being held legally responsible for research participants (and others) becoming infected.
- Being fined or arrested for not adhering to appropriate lockdown alert level restrictions e.g. not wearing masks, etc.

2.9.3 Reputational risks to researchers and/or the University

- Participants becoming infected by the researcher during the conduct of research and holding the university accountable.
- SU researchers acting as a “super spreader” of the disease when visiting isolated communities that were previously not exposed to the virus.
- Researchers and postgraduate students becoming infected during research and all close contacts must self-isolate for 10 days as per Government Direction.
- Researchers not adhering to national disaster and lockdown regulations.

Please refer to the REC: SBE’s webpage for more detailed advice and guidelines on the protocols that researchers should follow and useful resources: [http://www.sun.ac.za/english/research-innovation/Research-Development/integrity-ethics/human-research-\(humanities\)-ethics](http://www.sun.ac.za/english/research-innovation/Research-Development/integrity-ethics/human-research-(humanities)-ethics)

References and acknowledgments:

1. Health and Undergraduate Research Ethics Committees of Stellenbosch University (2020): HREC position statement dated 2020-03-20, HREC Communique 1 dated 2020-07-12 and HREC Communique 2 issued in October 2020.
2. Greeff, M. 2020. IMPLICATIONS OF ALERT LEVELS FOR RESEARCHERS AND POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC (VERSION 2). North-West University.

ANNEXURE A: GUIDANCE FOR IN-PERSON RESEARCH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC³

- This document serves to provide guidance for researchers who wish to apply for REC: SBE approval to conduct in-person research during the COVID-19 pandemic due to exceptional, ethically-justified reasons that prevent them from suspending their research or finding alternative ways to collect data.
- The document must be read in conjunction with the REC: SBE position statement published on 20 March 2020 and the REC: SBE communique published on 01 October 2020.
- In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers and the REC: SBE must proceed with consideration of the principle of *primum non nocere* or 'first do no harm' and an ethics of responsibility. Researchers must adopt a responsible approach to research in the context of COVID-19 which prioritises the health, well-being and safety of research participants, their communities and research staff and students over other considerations.
- The REC: SBE must carefully consider a reasonable ethical justification for in-person data collection in social science, behavioural and education (SBE) research to continue, especially where such research involves physical contact or being in undue physical proximity to research participants, without the prospect of direct benefit that could outweigh the potential harm of COVID-19 infection.⁴

1. APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS:

Researchers who wish to apply for REC approval to continue with in-person research during the COVID-19 pandemic must do the following:

- 1.1. Email the REC: SBE coordinator, Ms Clarissa Graham to notify the REC office of your intention to submit a request to conduct in-person research during the COVID-19 pandemic: cgraham@sun.ac.za
- 1.2. Submit your online application (new application for new studies, amendment for existing studies) to the REC: SBE for review and approval.
- 1.3. All in-person research will be treated as medium risk to high risk. The REC: SBE will review your application/amendment at a convened meeting of the REC: SBE. Please consult the REC agenda closing dates and meeting dates for your planning: [http://www.sun.ac.za/english/research-innovation/Research-Development/integrity-ethics/human-research-\(humanities\)-ethics](http://www.sun.ac.za/english/research-innovation/Research-Development/integrity-ethics/human-research-(humanities)-ethics)
- 1.4. The REC: SBE will consider applications for in-person research on a case-by-case basis by doing a thorough risk-benefit analysis and by evaluating the anticipated benefits of the research and measures that the researcher will put in place to prevent the spread of the virus.
- 1.5. The following information/documents must be attached to your application to the REC: SBE:
 - A detailed COVID-19 risk mitigation strategy and protocols that will be put in place to protect participants, yourself, your research team, and others whom you may interact with during your research. This document must be written in plain language as it is expected that researchers share this document with research staff and participants (where applicable) before any in-person activities are planned.⁵
 - If you intend to conduct in-person research on any SU campus or facility, please include the facility's workplace plan and walkthrough risk assessment. It is expected that you obtain permission from the facility manager before you apply to the REC.
 - A COVID-19 contact register template to record the date, duration and nature of face-to-face contact, name and contact details for each person interacted with during the research. This register is a

³ The REC: SBE would like to thank Prof Minrie Greeff (North West University) for her guidance and permitting the REC: SBE to cite the COVID-19 Research Risk Assessment and Management Approach (Version 2).

⁴ Note that the prospect of direct benefit during the COVID-19 pandemic applies primarily to certain types of clinical and therapeutic research and is unlikely to apply in a social, behavioural or educational research context.

⁵ The REC does not have a specific template for researchers. This is to ensure that researchers develop a document layout and format that is accessible to their specific research context. The ethical considerations regarding accessibility, readability and translations apply.

precaution to assist with tracing if it becomes necessary. The register will contain personal identifiable information and must be secured and stored under the strictest conditions as required by the Protection for Personal Information Act. The contact registers must be securely saved for at least three (3) months after the interaction has taken place.

- In cases where in-person activities are contingent on the permission of gatekeepers or institutions, the researcher must provide evidence that the continuation or start of in-person activities would be supported by the gatekeeper before the initiation of the study. Such gatekeeper permission is considered critical in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶
- In the case of sponsored studies, principal investigators need to submit written confirmation from the sponsor that they support that in-person data collection may commence for the study.
- A budget to enable the implementation of the proposed Risk Mitigation Plan (including costs of PPE, sanitizers, deep cleaning etc.) should, if applicable, form part of the budget submitted as part of the original application or amendment.

- 1.6. Each activity that involves in-person interaction with another individual during the course of the research must be scientifically and ethically justified, weighing up the risk of health and safety of the participant and research team with any direct benefit to be generated from conducting this research.
- 1.7. In the current COVID-19 context, in-person data collection from vulnerable communities, groups, and individuals such as the aged and persons with underlying disease/co-morbidities or who are immunocompromised are considered to be high risk. Online or virtual methods remain the only methods that will be considered. Researchers must also be mindful of conducting in-person research with people who live with or are caregivers of these vulnerable groups or individuals.
- 1.8. The REC: SBE acknowledges that not all countries or areas have enforced strict lockdown regulations. If in-person research is planned outside of South Africa, the researcher must motivate face-to-face research in a specific country according to the most recent COVID-19 statistics in that area⁷ and be cognisant of the current regulations on personal movement as determined by the government of that country. The researcher may need to provide some form of authorization or permission from local authorities stating that they may conduct in-person research in that country if there are strict regulations in place. Even if not required by the current regulations of that country, the researcher must keep a contact register of all participants.
- 1.9. The researcher must indicate COVID-19 infection as a potential risk in their research, in the research proposal and sections 5.21 and 10 of the online REC application form(s). The researcher must report any instance of infection (of a research team member or participant) as a serious adverse event.
- 1.10. Research Ethics approval of proposed in-person data collection does not override stricter requirements or other approvals required from relevant gatekeepers. Where stricter safety measures or precautions are required from any gatekeeper, such measures must be followed. The researcher must always comply with the strictest regulations or guidelines when interacting with institutions or organisations as various bodies, companies, schools, and institutions may have their own Occupational Health and Safety regulations, standards and guidelines related to COVID-19.

2. PROPOSED COVID-19 MITIGATION TOOLKIT

Please consider the following measures (where applicable) as part of your COVID-19 risk mitigation strategy:

Required set of behaviours during research interactions:

- Wearing a mask (not shared and washed on a daily basis).
- Regular hand washing.

⁶ The role of gatekeepers (such as provincial government departments, schools, companies, etc.) in advising researchers regarding the resumption, limiting or suspension remains invaluable as they possess information relevant to the specific context. Their guidance should be respected as access to a research site is not for the REC to decide.

⁷ Researchers should check the statistics on a daily basis and should keep themselves informed of the infection rates and trends in the area that they plan to conduct in-person research. The REC recommends using the World Health Organisations' COVID-19 dashboard which is updated on a daily basis: <https://covid19.who.int/table>.

- Social/physical distancing of at least 2m (seen as the most effective way).
- Not to touch face.
- Cleaning and sanitising of surfaces on a regular basis.
- Ensure that all research team members screen themselves for symptoms daily before going out to do fieldwork. Use SU's recommended screening tool i.e. Higher Health Check: <https://healthcheck.higherhealth.ac.za/login/?next=/>
- SU researchers and students are advised to download the South African COVID-19 tracing app on their phones for the duration of research activities.⁸ Researchers who are conducting in-person research in other countries should check for recommended tracing apps available in the country of residence.

Some equipment needed:

- Own mask (you might even need several if you are spending the whole day in the field and have to touch your mask or remove it in between data collection with participants).
- A visor for the researcher and the participant might be essential when observation of facial expressions during research is essential.
- Masks for participants (even for others in the participants' homes if research is community based).
- Thermometer, where relevant (this will depend on the venue used for face-to-face data collection).
- Alcohol-based hand sanitiser (70%).
- Sanitiser for surfaces e.g. chairs, table.
- A4 size plastic bag to put informed consent documents or paper questionnaires in (this will be left in the plastic bag for a minimum of three days).
- Basic materials on COVID-19 prevention protocols (proper use of masks, proper hand washing, grounds for social distancing, reason for cough etiquette) to distribute to participants.
- Box of tissues.
- Bag for disposal of, for example, used masks, tissues or gloves (if applicable).
- Disposable plastic covers for cloth covered chairs.

Additional precautionary measures that may need to be put in place:

- Ensure research team members know how to be more sensitive and manage vulnerability created by COVID-19 in participants and the research team and that research team members have access to psycho-social care, where deemed necessary.
- Ensure that all research team members know how to apply the health guidelines during the conduct of the research and how to recognise the symptoms of COVID-19.
- Ensure that research team members know how to safely handle paper e.g. informed consent documentation or questionnaires.
- Ensure that research team members know how to support and refer a participant or team member if suspected of being COVID-19 positive.
- Ensure research team members know how to manage the rest of the participants or the research team if they were in contact with the suspected COVID-19 positive team member or participant.
- Recognise the need for constant intensive monitoring by the project leader/study-supervisor(s) during the physical part of data collection to ensure that the research team adheres to all the precautionary measures.
- Plan for eventuality of one or more team members becoming ill on site and having to return home or be taken to a medical facility.
- Emergency procedures – e.g. communication if no cell service, field safety plan, map to nearest health facility/hospital.
- Allow extra time for logistics and co-ordination.⁹
- Get permissions ahead of time and send protocols to participants or relevant gatekeepers ahead of time. To avoid awkwardness, include that it is University COVID-19 policy not to shake hands, to maintain physical distancing, use hand sanitizer and wear masks to ensure the safety of all present.

⁸ <https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-progress-south-africas-effort-contain-coronavirus-covid-19>

⁹ Be mindful of the curfew since you are not allowed to travel during curfew without a Form 7 permit.

- Establish if the team will be working with the public, contractors, or an at-risk community in less than ideal spaces, e.g. refugees. Assess the current level of COVID-19 infections in the community being visited.
- Avoid engaging in any field research where you cannot maintain appropriate physical distancing (2m).
- Physical distance (2m) must be maintained between any individual, including other team members.
- Avoid as far as possible any field activities requiring face to face discussions with members of the public unless physical distancing can be maintained.
- Limit the duration of face-to-face activities as far as possible.
- Limit the number of participants per day and space meeting times. Disinfect surfaces before and after each interview.
- Limit use of group meetings and never more than 8 participants with 2 researchers, maintain 2m distancing.
- Ensure a psycho-social space (be caring, build trust and limit fear by explaining what is being done).
- Ensure sanitizing and cleaning measure when you get home before greeting and making contact with the rest of the family/friends sharing the home.
- Remember that the team will be seen as the face of the University and must be models of safe practice at all times.

(From Greeff, M. COVID-19 Research Risk Assessment and Management Approach (version 2), 17 July 2020.)